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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001522

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: RECALL PRIMER 1 OF 3: OPPOSITION UNITY PAINS

REF: A. LA PAZ 1129
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1082

Classified By: A/EcoPol Chief Brian Quigley for reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Just two days after opposition members of the Bolivian Congress attempted to change the rules of the recall referendum, prefects from Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni, and Pando announced July 4-6 that they would submit to the referendum without modification. Cochabamba Prefect Manfred Reyes Villa now stands alone in his staunch rejection of the August 10 recall vote on the mandates of President Evo Morales, Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, and eight department prefects (state governors). Leading opposition party PODEMOS is frantically trying to unite regional- and national-level leaders to form a united front to contest Evo in August despite lingering tension between the two camps over the decision to approve the recall. This is part one of a three-part series examining the political landscape one month before the planned recall referendum. END SUMMARY.

Does Unity Announced Mean Unity Accomplished?

[1](#)2. (U) Opposition PODEMOS Senator Luis Vasquez announced a joint-opposition campaign calling for the revocation of President Evo Morales would begin in the following days. Vasquez explained July 7 that a "wide-range" of opposition prefects, congressmen, and civil society leaders would seek to take advantage of "open spaces," i.e. free media, gatherings, and grass roots outreach, to campaign for Morales removal. "I have no doubt about (the strength) of this front ... everyone is uniting to confront the totalitarian project, the dictatorial project, that Hugo Chavez heads in Venezuela and Evo Morales (heads) in Bolivia."

Media Luna Musketeers: All For One and All For the Recall

[1](#)3. (U) All four "Media Luna" prefects (governors from the opposition-led states of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija) publicly endorsed the August 10 recall referendum in separate announcements July 4 and 6, leaving only Cochabamba Prefect Manfred Reyes opposing the measure. Pando Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez grudgingly confirmed July 6 to leading daily La Razon his "political" acceptance of the referendum, although

he clarified he could not endorse the recall's "judicial-legal" aspects, keeping the door open for future legal challenges. Fernandez stated that despite the government's unwillingness to modify "unjust" recall rules, "now we have defined our position, let's go with the referendum."

The Rest of the Story: Selling Prefects on the Recall

¶4. (C) Opposition organizer Javier Flores told PolOff that he had talked with Tarija Prefect Mario Cossio the morning of July 4 to convince him to sign onto the referendum in the form passed by Congress May 8. (Note: The May 8 recall rules require incumbents to receive as many votes against them as were cast for them in the last election, both in percentage of vote and total number. This means only 38 percent of voters would need to vote against the La Paz Prefect to end his term, but 54 percent would have to vote against President Morales. The other prefects fall between this range. Reftels. End Note.) Flores said Cossio's endorsement would be the "critical mass" the opposition needed to unite national and regional leaders around a joint-August 10 strategy.

¶5. (U) Cossio announced on the evening of July 4 that "we have made the decision to go forward with the recall, regardless of the adverse and unequal conditions." Cossio had previously announced the same day that he would only endorse the recall under the 50 percent plus 1 formula presented in Congress by PODEMOS and National Unity party representatives July 2. Also on July 4, Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas and Beni Prefect Ernesto Suarez announced they would submit to the recall referendum "without conditions," i.e. under the May 8 rules.

Lone Wolf Reyes Will Not Recognize "Ridiculous" Recall

¶6. (U) Cochabamba Prefect Manfred Reyes Villa continues to insist he will not recognize the recall under its current May 8 framework. He asked the OAS's Permanent Council to take a stand against the recall on legal grounds July 7, urging the OAS not to send observers and claiming the recall would "put democracy at risk" in Bolivia. Reyes criticized the recall as "a ridiculous decision" taken by PODEMOS' national party leadership without consulting opposition prefects. Reyes, Spokesman Erik Fajardo added "it is possible that PODEMOS is looking to reconcile with the prefects" because "it is trying correct its political error" in approving the recall. Fajardo added that Reyes would not change his mind "even though he is alone" because participating in the recall would be an endorsement of its "illegality." Prefects and civic committees of all five departments will meet to consider the referendum and other issues in a July 11 meeting of the National Democratic Council (CONALDE). (Note: CONALDE to be covered septel in part 2 of this series. End Note.)

Low Hopes to Change Recall Rules

¶7. (C) On July 2, the opposition proposed participation under a referendum requiring a 50 percent plus 1 vote to recall. According to EcoPol contacts, the move originates from a series of meetings the week of June 23 between regional and national opposition leadership to arrive at a common August 10 strategy. Flores told Emboff that a compromise between the PODEMOS groups and minority opposition parties was worked out in which national leaders in Congress would press for the 50 percent plus 1 formula in exchange for the prefects' agreement to participate in a common August 10 campaign. Flores said there are "no realistic expectations" the 50 percent plus 1 change will be approved by opposition congressmen, but that rejecting the measure will make Morales and company look like "cowards" and appease opposition prefects. (Note: It was unclear if prefects knew prospects for the success of 50 percent plus one proposal were so low when they endorsed the measure. The government's reaction to

be covered septel in part 3 of this series. End note).

Questionable Enthusiasm for "Unity" Campaign

¶18. (C) PODEMOS, national-level architects of the recall strategy have been frantically trying to convince opposition prefects to join them after the surprise May 8 Senate vote approving the MAS-drafted recall referendum, which had been in limbo since December awaiting opposition-controlled Senate approval (reftels). Flores told PolOff he was tasked to convince prefects to endorse the recall the first week of July. Armed with fresh PODEMOS-sponsored polling data showing Media Luna prefects would survive the recall "with a comfortable margin," while Evo would lose with a "united and effective opposition campaign," Flores said he was able to convince "everyone" (including smaller opposition parties and business leaders) in the opposition to line up behind the August 10 strategy advocated by PODEMOS, national leaders. The notable exceptions: "stubborn" prefects Reyes and Fernandez.

¶19. (C) Flores said he would try to talk with Reyes again July 7, but admitted Reyes slighted him July 4 and that it would be a difficult to change his mind considering PODEMOS, own polling data shows him losing (along with the prefects of La Paz and Potosi). Flores predicted that although Pando Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez was fervently against the recall, he would eventually "be forced to accept it" by the other opposition prefects. "It's not that he is unimportant, but he has to fall in line with (Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben) Costas."

¶10. (C) Ernesto Suarez, Prefect of Beni, told EmbOff that he recognized the value of a unified front, but he conveyed a lack of trust in PODEMOS after their injudicious submission of the prefects to the referendum vote. Suarez now sees no clear exit from participation in the referendum, which could decrease the number of opposition-led departments from seven down to three. In the best case scenario, Suarez predicts only losses in La Paz and Cochabamba, but sees Tarija, Pando, and Beni as also vulnerable. Suarez is confident enough in his own position that he is not planning a campaign for the referendum.

Comment

¶11. (C) Long-term cooperation between PODEMOS' national and regional leaders will depend on whether the opposition can unite in the short-term to survive the recall. Despite PODEMOS' cheery predictions and public talk of cohesiveness, healing the internal wounds infected by the unilateral decision of PODEMOS leaders (read: national leader and ex-President Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga) to approve the recall will not be easy. If PODEMOS cannot stitch itself together enough to save its own prefects, we expect the regional/national level divisions to deepen and fester, much to the delight of Evo and company. End Comment.

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